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The 7th Annual Mexican National Film Festival

GUADALAJARA, MEXICO

BY DAVID MCINTOSH

A stately and elegant metropolis of between five and seven million inhabitants, the city of Guadalajara has existed in relative peace, wealth and obscurity for many years. Known primarily as the birthplace of tequila and mariachi music, two primordial Mexican national symbols, Guadalajara enjoys a temperate mountain climate that has encouraged the development of a string of high altitude health spas and exclusive American expatriate communities just outside the city limits. In springtime, the city bursts into a riot of blossoms and scents that makes evening strolls magical. D.H. Lawrence frequented the area for its calmness and inspiring beauty. However, the social, economic and cultural dislocations of rapid modern development are shaking Guadalajara out of its privileged remoteness.

The recent industrial disaster in which gasoline explosions in sewers destroyed large parts of the city, killing hundreds and leaving thousands injured and homeless, gave Guadalajara a tragic international profile. Corrupt and negligent city officials are in hiding or are being charged with manslaughter. In the summer of 1991, an international furor erupted when the International Lesbian and Gay Conference slated to be held in Guadalajara was summarily cancelled by local Mexican officials in response to adamant opposition from increasingly organized right-wing fundamentalist Christian movements, primarily the Seventh Day Adventists and the Church of the Assembly, who have made enormous inroads throughout

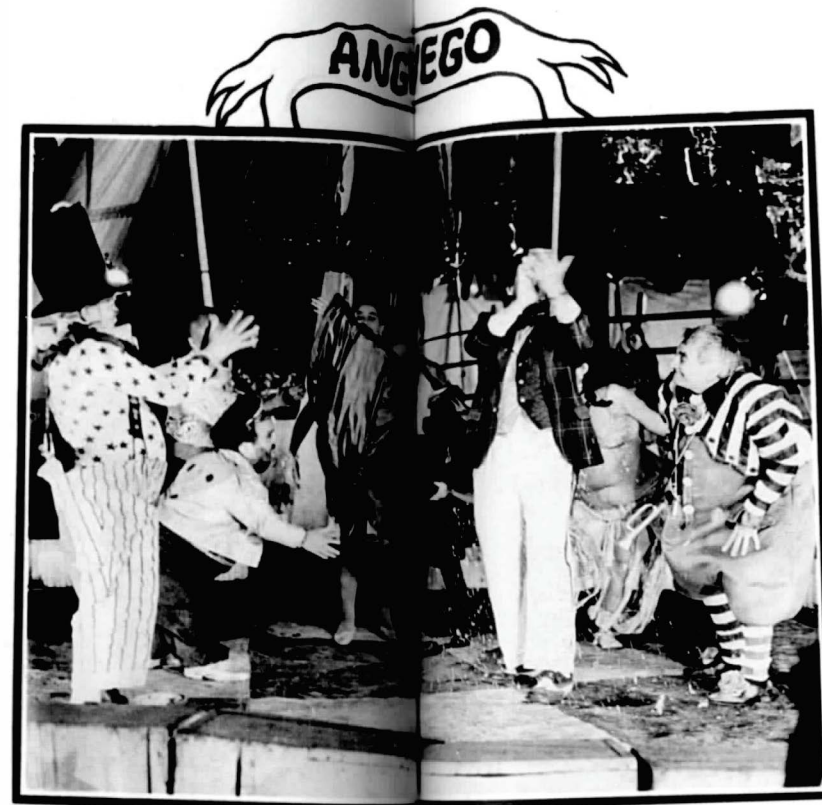


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northern Mexico. At the same time, Guadalajara has earned an undeniable reputation as the leading Mexican centre for drug traffickers. While the supposed illegal activities are not readily apparent, crossing into the USA from Guadalajara invites one of the most thorough luggage and body examinations imaginable, complete with trained drug-sniffing German Shepherds and armed DEA agents.

This bleak portrait of impending disintegration is not complete however; for the past seven years Guadalajara has been the home of the most important and innovative film festival in Mexico, which celebrates the creativity and growth of the Mexican film industry and provides the public with an opportunity to view film works that in many cases provide useful insights into the larger political and social issues they face. Under the guidance of internationally acclaimed filmmaker Jaime Humberto Hermosillo and film critic and historian Emilio Garcia Riera, and with the financial and organizational support of the very progressive University of Guadalajara, the Mexican National Film Festival has developed into a vital showcase for the previous year's production in Mexico, much of which will never be screened in commercial cinemas. And the nature of film production in Mexico has changed drastically in the last seven years as well. IMCINE (the Mexican Film Institute) has intervened in a fairly decrepit production system in order to allow new voices and stories to be heard. In fact, a whole new generation of filmmakers has developed – a generation that has seen more women make their first features than any other comparable nationally supported film production system and one that is eager to take on the complex intellectual and material issues all Mexicans must resolve.

The 1992 festival offered Guadalajara the premières of twelve feature films and eight short subjects as well as a thirteen-film retrospective of the work of Luis Alcoriza, who began his career as Luis Buñuel's screenwriter and went on to establish himself as one of Mexico's most important filmmakers. The most highly acclaimed of the new works was *Angel de Fuego* (trans. Angel of Fire; dir. Dana Rotberg, Mexico 1992), which won both the international and the Mexican critics' award. An impeccably constructed tale of the vicious self-serving manipulations of the old and sedimented as they prey on the young and the poor, Dana Rotberg's second feature film employs the theoretical underpinnings of the carnivalesque to motivate the discourse of anarchy, disintegration, hopelessness and abuse of women in Mexican society. Alma, a 13-year-old girl, is the fire-breathing star attraction of a dilapidated circus-cum-whorehouse on the outskirts of Mexico City. She runs away from this particular hell in order to save



the child she is carrying – a child fathered by her own father – and performs her fire-breathing act among cars on toxic street corners to earn enough money for food. She is taken in by a travelling puppet show, a world of miniaturized yet complete manipulation reigned over by a cruel prophetess who promises salvation to the poor and hopeless through hideous purification rituals. The destruction of Alma's child in one of these flesh mortifying acts launches Alma on a course of retribution and redemption that involves burning down the past. Despite the potential for parodic melodrama in the script, Rotberg has developed a visual strategy that is non-exploitive, open and

quite realistic – one that allows the viewer to move easily between allegory and actuality. The result is an unsettling and profound indictment of self-perpetuating and life-destroying notions of patriarchy and divine salvation, which have ossified Mexican society and mitigated against change.

Gabriel Retes's feature *El Bulto* (trans. The Burden or The Lump; dir. Gabriel Retes, Mexico 1992) treats historical process somewhat differently as it tells the story of a young journalist involved in radical student politics who is gunned down during a 1971 demonstration and remains in a coma for twenty years. He awakens to an unrecognizable world in

which his wife has remarried, his two children are grown-ups with shaved heads, piercings and attitude, his former comrades are either dead or yuppie sell-outs and the world is run by computers and MTV – not the socialist dream he was fighting for twenty years earlier. Fast-paced, witty and contemporary, *El Bulto* offers equal measures of biting humour and serious consideration of modern political dilemmas as it attempts to reconcile the hidden past with the spurious present. In many ways, the real burden in this film is repressed history – a history of brutal state oppression. The awakening of the unconscious man is a metaphor for a nation just beginning to come to terms with a past it has been denied.

Other films that enjoyed popular and critical support included: *Como Agua Para Chocolate* (dir. Alfonso Arau, Mexico 1992), an epic and often surreal tale of four generations of women told from the perspective of a woman born on a kitchen table whose diary is also a recipe book for delicacies with magical powers; *Playa Azul* (dir. Alfredo Joskowicz, Mexico 1992), a reworking of the decadent patriarch theme in which a corrupt bank official and his family descend into madness and self-destruction to avoid being made to account for their crimes; and *Tequila* (dir. Ruben Gamez, Mexico 1992), an occasionally inspired experimental feature that attempts to unveil the spirit and inspiration of ordinary Mexicans fighting to survive poverty and industrial chaos.

Over the last seven years, the Guadalajara festival has also turned into an important site for discussing the critical context into which national cinema is launched. Film critics and cultural theorists from all over Latin America met this year in a series of seminars to discuss their role in developing national and culturally significant cinema. The conundrum identified in the course of these discussions revolved around the steady decrease in film production in almost every Latin-American country except Mexico. The still-tentative sweep of democratization through Latin America over the last five years has been accompanied by economic restructuring around World Bank demands for state deregulation and privatization in return for new loan guarantees and debt forgiveness. These economic adjustments have cut deeply into funding for state-supported production agencies and have severely truncated their ability to support and intervene in indigenous film industries. The private sector in these countries is turning more and more to profit motives achieved through the delivery of cheap imported US media products. Participants in the critics' seminars expressed deep frustration over their inability to actively promote a diverse and representative cine-

previous 2 pages: STURLA GUNNARSON, DIRECTOR
Diplomatic Immunity (Canada 1991); Film stills

DANA ROTBERG, DIRECTOR
Angel de Fuego (Mexico 1992); Film still

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matic culture in such a rapidly changing situation.

Canada was accorded a very special place at the Mexican National Film Festival this year in response to increasing film exchanges between our two countries, including the Toronto Festival of Festivals' tribute to new Mexican cinema last year and a recently signed Canada-Mexico co-production treaty. Of course, Free Trade negotiations hovered around the edges of Canadian participation in the Guadalajara Festival. Canada and Mexico share concerns that state support of culture not be determined to be an unfair trading advantage by the US, given the significant role both the Canadian and Mexican governments play in financing cultural development. However, direct discussions between fourteen Canadian producers, directors and funding agencies and their Mexican counterparts seemed to offer a welcome tonic to the otherwise secretive tripartite NAFTA negotiations which include the USA. Because the Canada-Mexico co-production is a standard treaty laying out the terms of financial and union participation in joint ventures, these informal discussions at the festival focused on refinements to existing arrangements. Both Canada and Mexico have been utilized extensively by runaway American productions seeking lower wage rates and mutable scenery, and when the production is over money may be left in technicians' pockets but not nationally or culturally significant films. In order for this less-than-satisfying scenario to be avoided in new Canada-Mexico relations, participants in the Guadalajara discussions developed a unique proposal whereby a fund would be set up to co-develop film projects from the script stage and where the criteria for Canadian and Mexican state participation in the project would be that the script hold cultural significance for both countries. It is this kind of face-to-face negotiation to build mutual interests – instead of trade-off bargaining – that builds cultural fronts and that, in the long run, may be the only way to counter US influence in our national cultural policies.

To underscore the growing links between our countries in cinematic terms, Sturla Gunnarson's *Diplomatic*

Immunity (dir. Sturla Gunnarson, Canada 1991) was screened on the closing night of the Festival. Filmed primarily in Mexico with a Mexican crew and the participation of many highly regarded Mexican actors, Gunnarson's tale of the perils of Canadian bureaucratic involvement in Latin American development issues was very well received by a full house of Guadalajarans. The film demonstrates that progressive cultural and cross-cultural politics are not simply a question of high moral tone but the result of a process of negotiating authenticity and veracity, which abound in *Diplomatic Immunity* due in great part to the generous contribution of the Mexican participants. No doubt Gunnarson's film, along with previous joint ventures such as *A Winter Tan* (dir. Jackie Burroughs, Louise Clarke, John Frizell, John Walker & Aerlyn Weissman, Canada 1987) will pave the way for vital new collaborations between Mexicans and Canadians.

The people of Guadalajara jammed into cinemas to see what their festival had to offer this year. In some cases, public response was so overwhelming that seventh and eighth repeat screenings had to be scheduled. Mexicans are eager for intelligent, hard-hitting and innovative images of themselves and it seems certain that Mexican filmmakers are equally eager to satisfy that demand. The Mexican National Film Festival has established itself as a vital ongoing component of intellectual life and social change in Guadalajara, as well as making a crucial contribution to national and international cinematic culture. There is little doubt that as continental economic union looms larger, this festival will also continue to offer Canadians valuable insights into the evolution of culture and politics in Mexico, a nation that is as committed as we are to supporting and investing in cultural self-determination.



David McIntosh is a Toronto-based film and video programmer and writer. He is a former director of the Funnel Experimental Film Centre and has specialized in Canadian documentary and Latin American cinema. He has originated programming for the Euclid, Images 92, Cinematheque Ontario and the National Gallery of Cuba and is currently a programmer for the Toronto Festival of Festivals.

ALFONSO ARAU, DIRECTOR, *Como Agua Para Chocolate* (Mexico 1992); Film still